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Handling Mail

Terrorists have used mail to transport anthrax spores. Thus far, cases of cutaneous anthrax have developed in persons who have handled or may have handled or been exposed to contaminated mail, and cases of inhalational anthrax have occurred in persons working in areas in which anthrax spores from mail may have been aerosolized. Most of these cases have been associated with exposure in media companies, government offices and post office mail sorting and handling facilities.

Common sense and care should be used in inspecting and handling mail. The vast majority of mail is not suspect. Characteristics of suspect mail include the following:

- suspicious or threatening messages,
- excessive postage,
- writing with block letters,
- misspelled words, names of places or titles,
- no return address or return address does not match postmark,
- marked with restrictions, such as "Personal", "Confidential", "Do Not X-ray"
- unexpected and unsolicited,
- ridged, bulky, lopsided or uneven,
- addressed by title (such as "manager") or incorrect title,
- excessive tape or string, oily stains or strange odor,
- excessive weight, ticking sound, or
- leaking liquid or powder.

U.S. Postal Service facilities should exercise special care and should follow handling guidelines and safety procedures of the U.S. Postal Service (see <http://www.usps.com>). Businesses should review protocols for handling mail and revise, as necessary. Common sense measures should apply. Special care should be taken by print or broadcast media companies, and by government agencies likely to be targeted (federal officials, military, security, etc.). Provide information to staff regarding the characteristics of suspicious letters or packages. General recommendations are as follows:

- Limit agitation of mail, empty mail bags gently, do not shake, bump or sniff mail.
- Examine unopened mail for indicators that make mail suspect; powders, liquids and foreign bodies.
- Open letters and packages with a minimum of movement, avoid handling that would spill powders should they be in mail and packages, and open letters on a flat surface with a letter opener.
- In addition to the procedures above, handwashing is the best way to limit exposure. Gloves may be used to protect hands, but hands must still be washed after removal of gloves. Use of latex gloves may result in allergic reactions or development of latex allergy.

- Anthrax bacteria (and other bacteria that might be used as agents of bioterrorism) are not easily aerosolized from envelopes or packages containing powder, so respiratory protection is not generally recommended and, without formal training in use and fitting, may not be effective if aerosols are generated.

Anthrax bacteria cause skin infection when rubbed into the skin and inhalational anthrax when inhaled in a fine aerosolized mist. The greatest threat from ordinary mail containing anthrax spores would be cutaneous anthrax. Ordinary mail handling, especially with prudent precautions, would not produce infectious aerosols. Infectious aerosols could be produced by automated mail handling equipment, especially with the use of compressed air to move or unclog mail.

Anthrax spores do not cause immediate danger. Exposure does not always result in infection. Infection, when it does occur after exposure, takes days to develop. Antibiotics can prevent infection when exposure occurs and can treat infection.

For suspect envelopes and packages:

- Handle the letter or package as little as possible; do not shake or empty; do not carry it or show to others
- Place it on a stable surface, do not sniff, touch, taste or examine closely
- DO NOT OPEN
- Leave the area, alert others and keep others from entering the area
- Notify your supervisor, who should evaluate the situation and call law enforcement authorities. If you receive the suspect mail at home, call law enforcement authorities.

Contain any exposure that may occur:

- If the envelope or package was opened, do not the handle material further, do not clean up powder or liquid; if liquid is flowing put down absorbent paper, but do not pick it up
- Close off the room (doors and windows), allow only qualified emergency responders to enter. If possible, shut down heating/air conditioning/ventilation system.
- If contact with the material has occurred, do not touch your eyes, nose, other parts of your body or objects.
- If possible, wash hands thoroughly with soap and water
- If clothing is contaminated, do not brush the material off. As soon as possible, gently remove outer clothing and place it in a plastic bag and follow the advice of emergency responders. Take a shower, as soon as practical. Clothes without obvious contamination can be washed in the usual fashion.
- Seek additional instructions if there is more extensive exposure.
- Make a list of all people with actual exposure to the suspect material or the immediate area, and provide it to the investigating public health and law enforcement authorities.

For more information, see <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/topics/bioterrorism/BT.htm>, <http://www.bt.cdc.gov>, <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/DocumentsApp/Anthrax/10312001/han50.asp> and <http://www.usps.com>. The MDPH information line on emergency preparedness and response is **1-866-627-7968**.